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ABSTRACT

Low-income African American and Latina adolescent females need extensive support for developing and implementing career plans. This digest discusses ways schools and other institutions can provide an education that furthers career development. Interventions that have been shown to be effective with disadvantaged African American and Latina female students are: (1) school-based initiatives; (2) collaborations between institutions; (3) providing access to career information; (4) ensuring gender equality in occupational information; (5) finding ways to cope with racism, sexism, and discrimination; and (6) providing role models and mentors. Programmatic changes in schools and counseling departments, along with creative collaborations among schools and other institutions in urban areas are needed to meet the career development needs of African American and Latina girls. Organized efforts should be combined with personal encouragement and support from family, teachers, and community members. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINA FEMALES

Low-income African American and Latina adolescent females need extensive support for developing and implementing career plans. Many reside in economically depressed inner-cities where access to decent schools and opportunities for employment are severely limited. Thus they may lack academic skills and career-related experiences, and perceive narrow career opportunities for themselves, which combine to pose formidable obstacles to obtaining future jobs or careers (De León, 1996). In fact, unemployment rates for young African American and Latina women are higher than for white females or males of all ethnic/racial backgrounds; Latina adolescent girls drop out of school prematurely more often than other youth; the numbers of African American and Latina females heading households are steadily increasing, as are their poverty rates; and the gap in earnings between high school dropouts and high school graduates continues to increase dramatically (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996).

There is, therefore, an urgent need to provide female adolescents of color with a career education that will enable both economic self-sufficiency and personal fulfillment. This digest discusses ways for schools and other institutions to provide such an education.

The Career Development Process

Much of the past research on career development has been conducted on groups of young white men, although career experts now question its applicability to development of career programs for women and racial and ethnic minorities. Traditional models of career development do not take into account the complex realities of women's career choices, preparation, and working lives (Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995). The succession of career behaviors for women is far more complex than for men, because women frequently interrupt education and career preparation in order to integrate work and family life. They also must strive to overcome obstacles such as gender discrimination and sex stereotyping. Furthermore, for many people, particularly low-income, the traditional concepts of vocational decision-making and development are not that useful when their economic survival is the main motivation for getting a job.

Potentially more useful and relevant to understanding the career development of women of color, working class people, and others whose vocational behavior does not fit into existing frameworks has been the application of Bandura's general social cognitive theory to career development (1986). Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) considers several variables that guide people in their career development, such as self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and personal goals. It emphasizes the interplay between these psychological factors with other characteristics of a person (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) and their environments (e.g., support, barriers) (Lent & Brown, 1996). For example, within the SCCT framework, five areas can be considered relevant to understanding the career development of women of color: their knowledge of the work world, family factors, environmental factors, the impact of socialization, and the impact of sexism and racism. Similarly, from a social cognitive perspective, Hackett and Byars (1996) discuss the impact of typical socialization experiences of African American women on career-related self-efficacy, and suggest implications for career counseling (discussed below).

Limitations on Young Women's Career Choices

Through gender role stereotyping, girls and boys learn early which occupations are suitable for them, with the result of limiting career choices and planning. In addition, girls suffer from limited career awareness because they lack information on non-traditional career choices, particularly those related to mathematics, science, and engineering. From an early age girls choose not to, and are not encouraged to, take courses in school that would prepare them for careers in these fields. Low self-esteem, lack of female role models, low parental expectations, stereotypes of scientists, and lack of hands-on experiences in science all contribute to girls' development of negative attitudes towards math and science (Bailey, 1992).

Effective Career Development Programs for Young Women

Although a variety of approaches and specialized programs exist today in schools to prepare youth for future careers, the majority of low-income urban girls are not enrolled in them, and many of the programs do not directly address their needs. Interventions shown to be effective with low-income African American and Latina adolescent females comprise the following components:

School-Based Initiatives

Teachers can play an important role in providing career development support for females even though it has not been a significant responsibility of school-based staff or a subject of special training. Indeed, a study on the career expectations of Mexican American girls found that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (also associated with lower levels of acculturation) perceived their parents as less encouraging of their career aspirations and support from teachers as extremely important (McWhirter & Hackett, 1993).

Collaborations Between Institutions

Collaborations between schools, agencies, and higher education institutions can develop especially relevant programs. For example, the Girl Scout Council of Greater New York and The Bronx Zoo have jointly designed a program to introduce urban adolescent girls to the natural sciences and increase their awareness of the range of career options related to wildlife sciences and conservation biology.

A collaborative effort by the University of Texas at El Paso, a local YMCA, and three local school districts has created a successful program for Latina girls and their mothers: The Mother-Daughter Program (Tinajera, 1991). It is designed to encourage participants to value education, improve academic and life skills, develop leadership potential, and aspire to careers. The program includes mothers because their expectations, involve-

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ment, and role-modeling will have lasting effects on their daughters' educational development. Often the mothers return to school to complete their education, providing an important example to their daughters.

Several model programs for low-income African American adolescent girls have also been developed. Steppin' Up and Movin' On, a counseling program providing career education for urban, non-college-bound female students, emphasizes four areas: (1) individual assessment—helping students become aware of individual aptitudes and abilities; (2) education and career information—examining careers from a broad societal perspective and their specific implications for African American females; (3) skill-building exercises; and (4) integrated experiences with peers and counselors (Fisher, 1982). NEW PASS was developed as a model program to improve African American girls' awareness of nontraditional careers (Kohler, 1987). Its curriculum provides activities to expand participants' knowledge of nontraditional career options, build self-esteem, develop problem-solving and decision-making skills, and increase their awareness of the importance of making life plans. The curriculum also covers special issues in participants' lives, such as parenting, male-female relationships, and sexual violence.

Access to Career Information

Interventions should include current and accurate information about the nature of different careers and occupations, career preparation and training, and lines of progression leading to job advancement. Many low-income African American and Latina girls lack such an education because they are isolated from the work world, and because there are limited employment opportunities for them and for others in their community (Smith, 1983).

Gender Equality in Occupational Information

Persistent sex-role stereotyping of occupations continues to circumscribe young women's employment choices. Young African American and Latina women need to be taught to critically examine how gender role socialization impacts on their career goals, and be helped to explore higher paying "nontraditional" careers for women.

For example, Taking Your Place, a two-week summer program designed to encourage nontraditional career choices for adolescent girls in Wilmington, NC, offers participants the opportunity to expand their career choices as well as to develop a positive self-image (Rea-Poteat & Martin, 1991). The project includes field trips to local businesses to highlight technological occupations; classroom instruction; lectures and discussions involving women in nontraditional occupations; and hands-on applications, such as building an AM/FM radio, collecting marine animals, and changing an automobile tire.

Skills to Cope with Racism, Sexism, and Discrimination

It is critical to help young low-income minority women understand and overcome the effects of perceived barriers and negative outcomes on their own beliefs in their career abilities, interests, and goals. They need to build skills to identify racism, sexism, and discrimination; and to develop effective coping strategies for dealing with discrimination and social barriers that can limit their career and educational development and participation (Hackett & Byars, 1996).

Role Models and Mentors

The most effective kind of role model intervention for African American girls is often exposure to models similar in age and social backgrounds (Hackett & Byars, 1996). Successful coping behaviors (e.g., discussing frustrations and problems) that are actively demonstrated by similar-age peers, rather than adults, may be more likely to influence their skill development, and exposure to college students can enhance career awareness. Outcomes for low-income female adolescents can also be enhanced by mentors (Rhodes & Davis, 1996). Experience has indicated that African American girls who identified with "natural mentors" (extended family members) were more likely to be engaged in activities related to career goals, suggesting that parents, extended family members, and community members need to be recruited to provide support and mentoring.

Conclusion

Programmatic changes in schools and counseling departments, along with creative collaborations among schools and other institutions in urban areas, are needed to fully meet the career development needs of African American and Latina girls. In addition, given the obstacles faced by many of the students, these organized effects should be combined with personal encouragement and support from family, teachers, and community members.

—Jeanne Weiler

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